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Viewing cable 06BEIRUT895, MGLE01: SPEAKER BERRI ASKS FOR US, SAUDI, AND

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06BEIRUT895	2006-03-21 15:11	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Beirut

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000895

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/21/2016
TAGS: [CVIS](#) [EG](#) [KISL](#) [LE](#) [PGOV](#) [SA](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: MGLE01: SPEAKER BERRI ASKS FOR US, SAUDI, AND

EGYPTIAN HELP IN PRESSURING SYRIA ON PRESIDENCY

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) In a March 21 meeting with the Ambassador and econoff, Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri was upbeat about the success of the national dialogue he has brokered. He was confident of a solution to Hizballah's arms when the national dialogue resumes on March 22. The difficult issue, according to Berri, will be the presidency. There are too many candidates. To break the impasse, Berri urged the USG to ask Saudi Arabia and Egypt to pressure Syria to ask President Emile Lahoud to resign. Saudi Arabia is doing nothing now because it is angry with the March 14 coalition for rejecting its January initiative, according to Berri. Berri dismissed rumors of Syrian-proposed "compromise" candidates for the presidency as lies. He vowed to continue the national dialogue for as long as it takes, even if Syrian and President Lahoud oppose it. Responding to a congressional letter delivered by the Ambassador, Berri in principle agreed to an invitation by the House Democratic Assistance Committee for exchanges. End summary.

UP NEXT: ARMS AND LAHOUD

12. (C) On March 21, the Ambassador and econoff met with Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri and his foreign affairs adviser Ali Hamdan at his heavily defended official home in Ayn el-Tinneh. Despite the rumors in Beirut that the national dialogue is about to collapse, Berri was upbeat, expressing satisfaction at what has already been accomplished at the national dialogue under his auspices. He said that when the national dialogue resumes on March 22, the remaining two issues will be discussed: Hizballah's arms and the presidency. While not explaining his reasoning, Berri saw the arms issue as much easier to resolve than the presidency. Berri expressed confidence on his strategy to deal with Hizballah's arms. "I have prepared many exits...I am not afraid at all (of this issue)," he said cryptically. Berri claimed that if only the issue of Hizballah's arms remained, he could wrap up the dialogue quickly.

BERRI ASKS FOR PRESSURE ON SYRIA OVER LAHOUD

13. (C) The presidency, on the hand, concerned Berri. There were too many people that wanted the job. And at least three would be sitting at the conference table: MP Michel Aoun, MP Boutros Harb, and former President Amine Gemayel. Berri said that Gemayel told him he was not a candidate, but Berri did not believe him. Berri said that he had been talking privately with MP Saad Hariri, Gemayel, and Harb to resolve the presidency issue, but outside help would be needed to break the impasse. "I need help," Berri stated frankly. The US, France, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt must pressure the Syrian regime to ask President Emile Lahoud to resign, said Berri repeatedly for emphasis. The region must push Lahoud to resign. We need Arab pressure on Syria, Berri explained, but Saudi Arabia is still angry at Hariri and Walid Jumblatt for rejecting its January initiative to lower Syrian-Lebanese tensions. The Saudis are not doing anything, said Berri.

14. (C) Berri, bragging that he had not met with a Syrian official in six months (with the exception of a meaningless encounter with the Syrian speaker of parliament in Jordan), urged the Ambassador that the USG talk to Damascus. The Ambassador replied that, with US diplomatic relations with Syria not good right now, a US-Syrian dialogue is unlikely. Berri replied: "If you can't talk to the Syrians, then talk to the Egyptians and Saudis into pressuring the Syrians."

RUMOR MILL GENERATES PRESIDENTIAL NAMES

15. (C) Reciting the most recent rumors of the presidential race, Berri dismissed them as lies. In particular, he denied that the SARG is issuing orders to support one of three candidates acceptable to Damascus: social butterfly Michel Edde, Justice Minister Charles Rizk, and Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh. "It is a big lie," Berri cheerfully asserted. "The Syrians never contacted me," he claimed. Berri joked about Edde as president, saying that he would stay for 12 years, because it would take him 6 years to issue

BEIRUT 00000895 002 OF 002

his statements and 6 years for everyone else to answer. Berri then spread his own rumor, telling the Ambassador that Saad Hariri, not the Syrians, had mentioned Riad Salameh to him.

NEITHER SYRIA NOR LAHOUD
CAN DERAILED DIALOGUE

16. (C) Berri promised that he would continue the national dialogue as long as it takes. The national dialogue could continue for two months or more. Berri believed Syrian President Bashar al-Asad to be opposed to the dialogue based on statements made before the dialogue began. "I don't care," blustered Berri about Syrian opposition to the dialogue. Berri acknowledged that Syria does not have to cooperate with Lebanon on resolving sovereignty over the area. He suggested that the UN could pressure Syria to answer Lebanese claims.

17. (C) When asked about President Lahoud's fiery 3/18 interview on Aljazeera, Berri did not conceal his disdain for Lahoud. "He repeats the same thing for five years," chuckled Berri. He saw Lahoud's statements as trying to divide those participating in the dialogue. Recent statements by Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, including his 3/20 Al-Manar interview, were more reasonable. Explaining that he did not want to defend Nasrallah, Berri said that Nasrallah was only responding to Druze leader Walid Jumblatt's statements outside of the dialogue. No one should be making public statements outside of the dialogue, and Jumblatt violated that unwritten rule, according to Berri. Berri boasted that he has been able to bring Nasrallah and Jumblatt to the conference table. Thus far, the discussion between Nasrallah and Jumblatt has been cordial, with even a few jokes told, said Berri.

AMBASSADOR DELIVERS
CONGRESSIONAL INVITATION

18. (SBU) The Ambassador delivered an invitation by the House Democratic Assistance Committee for an exchange this summer and fall. Berri replied that, in principle, his answer is yes. He warmly recalled his visit to the US in 1963 on a visitor program when he visited more than 20 states. California and Colorado were his favorite.

COMMENT

19. (C) Many Lebanese are predicting that tomorrow's national dialogue will be difficult and inconclusive, given the controversial issues to be discussed. Skeptics believe that, with the Syrians supposedly angry at the dialogue's heretofore unprecedented success, Syria has passed messages to its allies -- including Berri -- to prevent any further progress. Yet Berri was beaming and optimistic at this meeting, undoubtedly a result of the unexpected success of the national dialogue he organized. His good spirits may also be linked to what he sees as improved relations with the USG, now that he is actually playing a positive role. Berri, a long-time Syrian ally, was also unusually dismissive of

Damascus. The old Berri surfaced briefly, however, with an impromptu (and unwanted) history lesson on the Shebaa Farms. End comment.
FELTMAN